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Klansmen Accused in '57 Death

From News Dispatches

MONTGOMERY, Ala., Feb. 26—A former KuKlux Klansman testified today that he was present when three white men forced a young black truck driver to jump into the Alabama River 19 years ago.

The testimony from Raymond C. Britt Jr. came at the outset of a preliminary hearing to determine whether three men charged in the slaying should be bound over to a grand jury on first-degree murder charges in the death of Willie Edwards Jr.

The three are William (Sonny) Kyle Livingston, a 38-year-old bail bondsman, James York, a 73-year-old retired city sanitation worker, and Henry Alexander, a 46-year-old plumbing contractor, all of Montgomery.

Britt said that he and the three defendants were members of the Klan in January, 1957, and that he was with them when they abducted Edwards.

The witness said Edwards, 25, was stopped just inside Montgomery while driving a grocery company truck and questioned about what Britt called insults made by a black man to a white woman.

He said Edwards denied making the statements, but the Klan members did not believe him.

"Alexander and Livingstone told him if he didn't tell the truth, they would throw him in the river, and I concurred, Britt testified under questioning by Attorney General William J. Baxley.

The witness said Edwards "was crying, sobbing and begging" but jumped into the Alabama River from a bridge when ordered to do so. He said Livingston was pointing a pistol at Edwards when he jumped.

Britt, who was guarded by two plain-clothes security men as he testified, said the Klansmen were "laughing and joking" about the incident after it happened and assumed they would read the next day that Edwards had "taken a swim." In fact, Edwards body was found three months later in the river.

Britt was indicted along with the three defendants in another incident of racial violence that took place in the same month in 1957, the bombing of four black churches and the homes of two pro-integration ministers in the days following integration of Montgomery city buses.

Livingston and Britt were acquitted in the bombing of one of the churches. Alexander and York were charged with bombing the home of the Rev. Ralph David Abernathy, a civil rights leader, but those charges were dropped after the others were acquitted.

Britt testified today that he quit the Klan years ago. He said he joined when he was a young man and "didn't know what I was getting into."